

PENGUINS IN BOXES OR SOLVING FOR THE EQUATION OF HOME

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IMAGE: Jessica Aul

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Heading East, I am not thinking about American coots or a stroll beside the Columbia River Gorge. On the alternate two-lane highway, I stay close enough to the car ahead of me to anticipate the curves, driving slowly to avoid the black ice in my little hatchback sans snow tires or chains. No single street or ambient light. Not even a visible star with all the low hanging clouds. All is dark. Dark in the way that the absence of light feels silent. Silent in a way that breaks.

Tonight, the I-84 is closed due to a landslide. Tonight, the power has gone out in my new rental. The forecast predicts below freezing. No wood burning stove or gas heat. Without considering thermodynamics too closely, I understand that the ambient house temperature will not reach sub-freezing even though the forecast predicts 24°F. Some heat will be conserved. In theory, the house contains insulation. In reality, I recognize how quickly my feet become chilled walking across the floor without slippers, how the upstairs rooms are unreachable by central heating even when the electricity works. Even with the principle of heat rising, my home office and bedroom remain colder than the lower half of the house.

January has arrived, wrapping herself in wool blankets, shedding pillows of snow. Just this week, I dug my car out of several feet. One. Two. Three times. Every morning, I awaken to discover that the plow, having done its job, has banked a fresh wall along the perimeter of my hatchback.

All that cold rendering the driver's side door temporarily frozen. Every few days, I crawl in through the passenger door to place the key inside the ignition and give it a smooth twist to make sure it still runs, a hillock of snow forming inside the car cab. My attempts to keep the outside environment from overtaking the car interior fail, as a ribbon of green lines the hatchback door and more than flecks of ice install themselves wherever they land freely.

For the first time since my move, I feel alone in all this. Quite literally, I will be as my housemate has headed to a small town in Oregon known for rodeos and well, wool blankets. My iPhone on shuffle, I skip the tracks that are too distracting or heavy as another truck passes swiftly into the dark and oncoming traffic. A Charlie horse rears up in my right calf. I take my foot off the gas pedal for a few seconds, while going downhill, to let the car coast. A quick resistance stretch alleviates the cramping. Part of me finds the humor in all this. My mantra-turned-hashtag with friends #somedaythiswillbefunny. I wonder if I am tempting fate with my constant references to dark comedy.

Once home, I layer blankets one atop another atop another on top of me. I receive a call from the new landlord. He's at the door. Hands full of electrical chargers for my phone, which he knows was not able to hold a charge fully, a headlamp, and a miniature battery-powered lantern that for some reason truly tickles me. I mean. It's a little lantern shaped like. A little lantern. The next day, he brings the generator that had been buried under heaps of snow, teaches me when to fill the gas tank, which levers to move this way or that, how to give the rope a good yank against resistance to get the motor running. I can power two things. It quickly comes down to my tiny but mighty space heater, named after a natural disaster, and the refrigerator.

Before the electricity switches back on thirty-six hours later, I have lived multiple lives. In one of them, I am a pioneer woman. My wagon, a Nissan Versa hatchback. In place of supplies, the last loveseat wrangled from the warehouse of a popular self-assemble furniture store awaits me in its five feet of packaging. I don't even know what it looks like, but I'm pretty sure it's one of those light hues that takes on dirt just by thinking impure thoughts. All I know is that with the supply chain shortages, you take what you can get during the pandemic. I have a couch-like thing and because I am not a normal person, this means I have the equivalent of a desk, something to hold me while I hold onto my keyboard and type. This is a cause for celebration.

The path to the house is long. Long in the way that a pathway is long, when it is night or Halloween and you are a child wondering if the walk is worth the possible peanut butter treat or if someone is about to hand you a toothbrush or penny. The previous day, the path could have been short, but with all the snow turned ice there would be no traction. There would be no walking this box corner over corner to the doorstep as I did decades earlier with the desk that I scored at a garage sale. Back when I still had notions of how a writer must write, I could take a damp cloth to the dirt-encrusted edges of a desk and call it good. Now, I know better. Now, I know that writers write however they damn well please. A wet finger to the side of the shower glass, a few soapy words lifting with the aroma of citrus mint bodywash. A post-it stuck to the mirror with the message, "Write as if your life depends upon it, because it does."

At the moment, writing is not at the forefront. I have slithered outside at an hour where I need the headlamp to see. I figure if this is about to go horribly wrong, then at least no one will be there to witness it but me and perhaps the family of deer that has taken up residence in our yard. The box settles on the tarp that I laid down on the dirt or the road or whatever surface provides a perfect trajectory from the car to the house door. I am having flashbacks to penguins in boxes and other physics word problems that involve calculations of incline planes. If this is the last loveseat, I shall treat it as though it were a precious penguin and deliver it to the door in one piece. In one smooth swoop, the package sails along the ice path. The process of twirling an absurdly long Allen wrench happens later. The sun sets. The headlamp goes on. Out fly the curse words with each bump of the wrench against the edge of frame. The comedy that unfolds is one composed in private, but registered around the world. What compels a person to assemble furniture in the dark?

In the morning, I know I will play the game of Are you still safe to eat? with the numerous greens, half-pint of cream that overnighted in the car and then spent time with and without generator-run electricity. When I return the three electrical cords, two of which I've managed to snake into less than perfect o's and the third of which I let my landlord quickly rope into order, J tells me about his one-mile hike through the snow for his Saturday kayaking adventure. We compare river stories, and he is polite enough to listen as I tell my inexperienced one about how I took my first swim into a hydraulic on the White Salmon this summer. He tells me I should kayak, reassures me that I'm not too old (a concern I voiced), and to think of the tricks I could do. Maybe the last thought is more of a spin on The Cure's "Just Like Heaven" that I let play on my drive the night previous. While I don't think I will take up river kayaking, especially in the winter, I realize that already I am checking off at least one box of my goals for this move. Connection. Possibly truth, too. The almost two days without electricity required me to get to the core of what a person really needs to survive. Small glimmers of love present in the way one returns herself to the map of her own life.

Blood rushes into my fingertips and toes. The wind crisp against my face as I close the door behind J. In one day in White Salmon, I have interacted more with neighbors than I had in five years in Renton. D. lives in the green house up the hill and slows his Sprinter van to make sure I'm ok every time I dig my car out of another wall of snow. A. asks if my housemate and I have enough food, introduces me to her mom on FaceTime. M. and S. tell me about the landslides before they even happen, advise me to take the alternative route into Portland and mind all that warmth generates, hillsides of slush that must run somewhere.

The work is still working itself out, as I learn the levels of adventure that I wish to experience. Sliding a five-foot furniture box atop a tarp along the snowy path to my new home and assembling my new loveseat with a headlamp is just one moment that reminds me that I have taken the basic need for electricity, warmth, for granted. Now as my fingers hit each key and the space heater keeps me toasty, I watch the sun melt more snow off my neighbors' roofs. Just for today, I accept the unknown adventure and what it has yet to teach me. Just for today, I let the penguin decide its fate.

